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# THE WELFARE WORKER'S HUMAN SIDE

BY ELIZABETH JORDAN

THERE are all sorts of conceptions and misconceptions of the welfare worker's work, of her duties, and of the employer's need of her. Though she has been in existence for years, though the vast majority of our great corporations, firms and factories have her on their pay-roll, the general public has only a limited notion of what she is and what she does.

What is welfare work? Who are welfare workers? In some definitions welfare work is anything, outside the technical details of an industry or a trade, which makes the workers more valuable to the employers. Whatever tends to make them healthier, more skilled, more interested in their work, belongs to the welfare division. The range of such work is wide. It may mean nothing more than having on hand a kind and pleasant-tempered woman to suggest to young girls that it is detrimental to health to stand all day on teetering, Eiffel Tower heels. Or it may mean that a force of architects, builders, engineers, landscape-gardeners, teachers, play directors, gymnasium teachers, moving picture artisans and what not, may be required for a given "welfare" job.

Take the simpler situations first. What should the ordinary woman welfare worker in an industrial or commercial plant be? What gifts should she have, what training? The correct answer is that if she has the gifts which would make her the highly successful mother of a large family, plus half a hundred other gifts, she will be fairly well equipped for welfare work. She—fortunately it may be a collective "she"—must know what to do when one girl faints. She must be able to connect another girl's morning lassitude with a shrewd guess as to last night's recreation. She must know what to do when a third cuts her hand on her machine. She must be able to distinguish the difference between the languors of a love affair and those due to an infected tooth. She must be able to tell when a girl is lying to her, and

she must be able to convey this fact to Josephine without causing her to take refuge in utter, surly silence. She must be able to distinguish the first offender in thievery from the hardened thief. She must know how to manage when half the working force has the influenza. She must be able to persuade this girl not to spend two months' salary on an unsuitable evening dress, and that girl to go to the doctor. She must convince the free-born American working-woman that it is no denial of the rights guaranteed to her by the Constitution to ask her to hand in her cafeteria check right side up and with the money to pay it in proper order—for when one is feeding six or eight hundred women in three-quarters of an hour such things count! She must be able to preserve her self-possession when detectives and an irate parent arrive from Florida in search of the latest recruit to her staff, who, despite the plausible story she has told in the employment department, is merely a home-bored “flapper” out to see life.

It thus requires a large degree of versatility to be an industrial welfare worker. But let us go from generalizations to particular instances. What, for example, happens to girls working in department stores who are suspected of stealing and perhaps finally caught at it? In all probability there is no stern reference to the employing and discharging branch of the store for final, drastic action. The human quality is, of all the thousand qualities needed in this comparatively new profession, the pre-eminent one—and it is exercised in these cases in a somewhat original fashion.

“There is bound to be a certain amount of thievery,” says the counselor of one such girl. “Any welfare worker who believes that her store is free from it is only deceiving herself. It is impossible to avoid it where there are so many temptations—so many pretty things that beauty-loving girls crave, so many little things that are easy to pick up and slip into a convenient pocket; and where there is the constant handling of money by girls who sorely need money. It is easy for girls to convince themselves that the petty thefts with which they begin do not matter much—that the store ‘can afford it.’ They don’t consider whether they themselves ‘can afford it.’ They are not concerned with the abstract question of character building.

"When finally the head of the department in which thefts are occurring has practically proved one girl guilty, that girl is sent to me. As a usual thing, if she is really the first offender she always claims to be, she can be induced to confess. Of course there is no 'third degree' method of extracting the confession. I try to get her to make the admission because, with the truth between us, there is a possibility of building some sort of permanent and worth-while relation such as could not be built on a basis of her falsehood. When she has confessed I try to learn from her whether it was girlish vanity or poverty and hard home conditions that brought about the transgression. If the latter, I try to devise some help for her. If the former, I let her know that at least I understand and do not utterly condemn her. But I try to make her see in her turn how her action has brought suspicion and shame upon all the girls with whom she is working—all her associates in her department. She has not only done the store an injury, but she has seriously injured those girls. Is she willing to admit as much to them, and to abide by their decision as to whether she is to remain and to have another chance?

"That is the 'trial by a jury of one's peers' that we have worked out. If the offender agrees—and she usually does agree if, as she almost always claims, it is her first fall from honesty—the other employees of her department come up into the general manager's room. There they are told what has happened. She admits it before them all. The manager asks what they desire the verdict to be. Shall the girl be discharged, or shall she have another chance? If she is to have another chance, her associates are told, it must mean that she is taken back absolutely—that never by the flicker of an eyelash must she be reminded of or taunted with her offense. Much has been said of 'woman's inhumanity to woman,' but it is refreshing to add that in the great majority of cases the girl's associates are merciful. 'Give her another chance,' they say, and the session ends with their all shaking hands with her. It is not a sloppy, sentimental performance. It is a carefully thought out piece of business policy."

Not everyone admits the need of this human touch. To some persons the welfare worker in industry is another bit of machinery, another contrivance of steel and wood, or another piece of red

tape. There are radicals—especially youthful radicals—who, resenting the fact that the world is so constituted as to make welfare workers a necessity, transfer their resentment from the fact to the agents of its alleviation. There was at least one such young radical in a recent Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers. The occasion on which she publicly expressed her views was in the course of a debate in the English composition class. In her vocabulary, "welfare work" was defined in two ways. It was either a cunningly applied gilding to the prison doors of "enslaved" workers, or it was the drug-charged soothing syrup with which the hated race of the enslavers stifled their conscience. She argued brilliantly. But happily there were young women of her own industrial group who strained at their leashes during her presentation of her argument, and who were on their feet tearing it to pieces as soon as she sat down. They were not such eloquent debaters as she; but they had one great advantage—they happened to know what they were talking about. They started their arguments from the safe premise of experience. They told the young scorner of welfare work exactly what it had meant to them; how it had been one of the educative forces that had fitted them for the positions in which they found themselves. And they were a picked lot; leaders in their various occupations.

Those girls were not to be convinced by any process of logic, any dazzling display of rhetoric, that the nurse in their factory, the personnel manager of their department in their store, the treasurer of the loan society in their laundry, was a disguised agent of capitalistic tyranny, any more than they could have been convinced that the chance to attend Bryn Mawr College for a season was part of the deep-laid plot. They extolled welfare work and welfare workers. And to them it was the human side of the welfare worker's efforts that had made the strongest appeal—though, almost without exception, they objected to the general notion of being "helped". It was an incident which showed the power of a word. Repeated to the head of the Welfare Division in a big New York department store, it brought forth a smile. "If they had called it 'personnel' work instead of 'welfare' work, there would have been no debate," she said. "Not even the most independent, the most radical-minded working girl

objects to the knowledge that there is a 'personnel' division in her industry. It has a less condescending sound. 'Welfare' work is still allied with 'charity;' and one cannot blame a worker for resenting the idea of charity in her relations with an employer."

In some large department stores the employees are allowed to run charge accounts after they have been with the firm three months. These accounts are not permitted to total more than a week's salary, except after consultation with the head of the welfare work. The object of the arrangement is not to keep clerks and other workers in the bondage of perpetual debt, but to keep them free of that detriment to good salesmanship and good, efficient work. Somewhat allied to this is the loan privilege, which many large industrial concerns, both producing and selling, offer their people. Saving is encouraged. The commercial history of the country is full of cheerful stories of homes owned, of debts paid, of self-respect inculcated by the ancient process of honest acquisition—all due to the way in which group associations of employees, with the aid of the management, have encouraged saving and made it possible.

"Made possible" does not always mean made easy. Saving is a difficult road of self denial and privation, even with every encouragement. The card catalogue in one big concern recalled to the welfare worker of that store the case of a Russian who came to this country before the United States entered the war. "He must have lived on next to nothing a week," the welfare worker began as she looked at the card. "After he had been here the required three months he joined our savings association. Our employees use the savings bank, and the bank's interest on all their deposits as workers are doubled by our firm. Of course the deposits must be of the money earned here. The firm would not care to undertake to double all the deposits which an employee might be able to make through commandeering the wages or the savings of all the members of his household, wherever they worked! So the deposits have to bear a convincing relation to the wages of the depositor. Well, this Russian's savings bank book shows that within three years he had saved a thousand dollars. Then he came to the loan department and asked for a hundred and fifty

dollars. He had been saving in order to be able to bring his mother and his two young sisters over to America. That had not been an inexpensive achievement, but he had succeeded. His face was beaming with joy. He had brought them over, he had installed them in a flat somewhere, and now he wanted a hundred and fifty dollars to buy a little furniture. Of course he got it, and of course—with the apprenticeship to thrift that he had already served—he promptly paid it back.”

From another great firm came a story of savings that were used not to establish a home, but temporarily to break one up. A big, strong man who had come in with a hard luck record and who had worked energetically and successfully at first, developed in six months a “grouch”, and his work suffered. The head of his department, regarding him with attention, was soon able to see that his morning moods and afternoon inefficiency were due to nightly potations. In the old days that would have been the signal for dismissal. But in this business a welfare department intervened. It developed that the man’s wife, already the mother of two children, was about to have another baby. The doctor at the clinic she attended had told her that she had incipient tuberculosis and that she would not survive the coming ordeal unless she took extremely good care of herself. So she moped and cried and neglected the flat and the meals and the children, while she wished she were back in Ireland with her mother. The husband, being neither saint nor stoic, acted as any other undisciplined young man might have conducted himself in the circumstances.

The welfare worker of that concern did not remind him of the responsibilities he had undertaken at the altar. Neither did she send someone to tell the wife she ought to be ashamed of herself. Instead, after a few friendly visits to his home, it was decided to lend the man enough to send the ailing, unhappy little woman and her children to the old home for which she longed, and where her mother and sisters could help her. The sum of one hundred and sixty-four dollars was loaned and three steerage tickets were bought. The business, although the welfare department distinctly discourages “collections” and gifts as a usual thing, contributed an extra fifty dollars. In three months the man re-

ported a fine baby born in Ireland, and a mother doing well and recovering her health. He himself was keeping his own house and keeping it neatly. He even did his own washing, and it was well done. In time he paid back two hundred and fourteen dollars to the loan fund. Then he was told that he had overpaid by fifty dollars—that the coat-and-shoe money had been a gift from the firm, and that he was, by half a hundred dollars, a member of the capitalist class!

Welfare work received a great impetus during the war when labor was scarce and when it was desirable that workers should not only be induced to remain with the job, but should also be kept in condition to do it well. There has been much falling off in it since the war, but this falling off is seldom or never on the part of firms and corporations that had tried it before the war, that have tested it for years, and that know what it means in increased efficiency, quite apart from what it means in general humanity.

Mining companies have built whole "welfare" towns. So have manufacturing companies. Other companies have transformed whole districts of already settled communities. Publishing concerns have been especially progressive in all welfare work. Department stores and factories have been increasing their efficiency for more than twenty years by a constantly growing knowledge of the relation between good work and healthful, cheerful surroundings, sanitary working conditions, hours for relaxation and recreation.

Welfare work usually begins with health. Candidates for employment are examined to find if they are likely to be able to do successfully the work required, and whether they have any infectious disease which might be a menace to their fellow employees. Once admitted to the force of an industrial concern, they find there agencies for keeping them in condition—doctors, nurses, rest rooms, hospitals; the elaborateness of the equipment depending upon the size and progressiveness of the concern. There are lunch rooms for supplying good food at the lowest possible prices. There are recreational opportunities—noonday dancing, baseball clubs, vacation funds. Some stores and factories supply dental help. Everything that bears upon the



health of the worker and so upon his or her value as a worker is considered by the enlightened employer a matter for help, both to the conditions of the work and the condition of the employee.

Some educational work is done by a great many businesses. It may be entirely education in the particulars of the business. Classes in salesmanship are the commonest example of this form of work. Or it may be generally cultural. In the case of young people entering industry at fourteen, many States now require continuation classes to be held in the shops and factories employing them, the State supplying the teachers and prescribing the curriculum.

The workers' economic condition is helped by such savings and loan associations as have already been cited, and also by schemes of coöperative buying which many concerns have instituted. Here laundry workers have bought their summer gingham at wholesale prices through their welfare department; there bank clerks have bought their butter and eggs, their bacon and sugar, through theirs; and so on.

The mental condition of the worker is at last recognized as one of the largest factors in her efficiency or inefficiency. This has required the extension of the welfare worker's task into that of the home visitor, the friend, the advisor in all the problems which human beings of every class are so marvellously able to construct for themselves. In other words, when welfare work entered the shop and the factory, woman followed her old work out of the home in a very special sense—her old work of nursing her sick, of binding up her wounded, of making cheer for her young, of teaching them prudence, of giving them understanding and sympathy.

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